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# A Greek Drama Unfolds as Athens Prepares for the Olympics

By Michael Llewelyn Smith

LONDON — No sooner is the curtain down on Sydney than it rises on Athens, host city for the 2004 Olympic Games.

For most Greeks, winning the right to hold the Games in Athens was a source of national pride. Few people, however, realized what a headache the organization would be. As the scale of the task sinks in, Greeks reflect ruefully that Sydney's is a hard act to follow.

The idea was good, the execution is difficult. Having failed to secure the 1996 centenary Games, this time Athens put together a winning bid resting on the major infrastructure works in the Attica basin already built or planned with financial help from the European Union. The Games would return to Greece, where they originated in 776 B.C., and where they were

revived by Baron Pierre de Coubertin in 1896. Greece would show that a small country could handle a giant project. 2004 would see a revival of the authentic Olympic spirit.

It all seems more difficult now. Since Greece won its bid, the head of the Athens Organizing Committee has twice been replaced and the government concedes that preparations are well behind schedule. In April the International Olympic Committee warned Prime Minister Costas Simitis to get moving, or else. An IOC delegation will visit Athens on Wednesday to check in progress.

There are still voices warning that the IOC might have to withdraw the Games from Greece. That will not happen. These

Games are too important for Greece to be lost.

Under Mr. Simitis, responsibility is now divided between two of his most experienced ministers and the wealthy conservative politician Gianna Angelopoulou, who heads the organizing committee.

Mrs. Angelopoulou, installed by Mr. Simitis this summer to inject dynamism into the organization of the Games, led the team behind Greece's winning bid. She has the confidence of the IOC president, Juan Antonio Samaranch.

Costas Laliotis, minister of the environment, oversees the major public works projects required for the Games. Theodore Pangalos, a controversial former foreign minister, has

sport within his portfolio as culture minister. Three large egos are involved, in a finely balanced creative tension between government, organizing committee and the IOC. It must be made to work.

Greece is expected to tell the IOC this month that the commissioning of the major works — stadiums, sports complexes, athletes' and media villages, rowing and yachting centers, the equestrian center — will be brought forward from April 2004, the deadline that Mr. Laliotis had set himself, to late 2003. That is still desperately tight for the necessary tests and for ironing out any problems.

Disputes over organization distract attention from other issues: What are these Games for, and what image does Greece want to project to the outside world? A country of ancient ruins, ouzo and folk dancing? Or, as Mr. Pangalos wants, a modern European country with developed organizational skills and a culture, modern as well as ancient, worth the attention of visitors?

There is also concern about the long-term legacy of the Games for Greece's environmental and architectural heritage. Environmental groups are up in arms about plans for a rowing center that they say will damage valuable wetlands near the village of Marathon — the site of the ancient battle that gave its name to the running event.

But questions of cultural image will seem insignificant if Athens fails to organize an efficient Games. That is the challenge that Greece now faces.

It means getting the traffic management right — a major challenge in itself for a city that suffers some of the worst congestion in Europe. Despite the relief offered by Athens's new metro system, congestion is likely to get worse. By 2004, according to the experts, 400,000 new cars will have joined the Athens streets. It can already take an hour and a half to get from the northern suburbs to the center of town. The move of the airport next March to a new site east of Athens will add to the short-term problems.

Paradoxically, the fact that the Games will take place in the hot, dry month of August should be the saving of them. In August thousands of Athenians leave for the beaches and islands. For a few weeks it is possible to circulate freely. But what if the people decide in 2004 to stay at home for a change — and watch the Olympic Games?

Experienced Greece-watchers believe that Greece will be ready on the day in 2004. But there will be drama of Aristophanic energy between now and then.

*The writer, British ambassador to Greece from 1996 to 1999, contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.*